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SIPDIS

WHA FOR A/S TOM SHANNON, ACTING DAS BISA WILLIAMS
RICARDO ZUNIGA, WHA/CCA
EUR/WE FOR ALEXANDRA MCKNIGHT AND STACIE ZERDECKI

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/08/2019

TAGS: PGOV PREL CU SP CR
SUBJECT: CROATIAN AMBASSADOR DOWNPLAYS MESIC VISIT TO CUBA

REF: HAVANA 592

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Arnold A. Chacon for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Croatian Ambassador to Spain Neven Pelicaric took great pains October 1 to downplay the significance of Croatian President Mesic's visit to Cuba the week of September 16, the third since his election in 2005. During a one-on-one lunch meeting, Pelicaric urged the USG not to take the media hype at face value. He was eager to let the USG know that he personally considered the visit to have "zero value" and the Croats were somewhat embarrassed by Cuba's red carpet treatment. Pelicaric, who is also accredited to Cuba, accompanied Mesic and conveyed to the Charge that the Cubans harped on the U.S. embargo, that the "Miami 5" were an ever-present theme, and that Cuba expected the EU to end its Common Position on Cuba. The Charge pressed Pelicaric hard on human rights issues and the need to maintain pressure on the regime for democratic reforms, including the release of political prisoners. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) Ambassador Pelicaric said the Cubans played up Mesic's visit because it was the first visit by a European leader to Cuba in quite some time. He made special mention of Vice FM Dagoberto Rodriguez, declaring he was a key figure during the visit and, according to Pelicaric, a key player in the regime, more influential than the Foreign Minister. Both Rodriguez and Cuban President Raul Castro attended a private dinner hosted by the Croatian President.

¶3. (C) Mesic had earlier been scheduled to visit Cuba in November or December 2008 but had postponed his trip, ostensibly because he wanted the political cover of going as a "lame duck." Pelicaric conceded the Croatian press had been "very hard" on them for undertaking the visit, which Pelicaric justified as partly "payback" for Cuba's support of Croatia against the Czech Republic for a seat on the UNSC.

The Croatian FM did not accompany Mesic because he did not want it to impact negatively on his election campaign. Mesic and Pelicaric were joined instead by the president's granddaughter, the president's political advisor, and a Croatian business delegation.

¶4. (C) With the exception of a visit at the request of President Mesic to a Che Guevara memorial and museum in Santa Clara, the visit was totally scripted by the Cubans and Croatian access was very controlled. Asked whether they had met with civil society or discussed human rights, Pelicaric told Charge it would neither have been "appropriate" to see dissidents nor to discuss political prisoners during an official visit. The Charge expressed surprise the Croats had not seen members of civil society and reminded Pelicaric of U.S. and international efforts to keep human rights at the forefront of discussions with Cuba. He noted that USG

officials visiting Cuba continued to reach out to civil society whether or not condoned by the regime, and reiterated the importance of European democratic governments pressing for freedoms in Cuba and supporting civil society. Pelicaric noted their visit coincided with that of DAS Bisa Williams (reftel), and inquired whether USG views on Cuba had changed.

The Charge clarified that U.S. outreach to Cuba and efforts to shift the discussion in a more positive direction, including the direct mail talks, also included sustained calls for respect for human rights and the release of political prisoners.

¶ 15. (C) Despite the VIP welcome and packed program of events and signings, Pelicaric observed the Croats' visit was mostly "feel good" stuff of "zero value." Croatia and Cuba signed a cultural cooperation agreement touching on Croatian-Cuban cinema exchanges, visits, higher education, sports, and music. Pelicaric opined such non-substantive exchanges were "all we could do" and said the Croatians had caveated all agreements by noting they had to conform to EU standards given Croatia's expected EU accession. Other areas of discussion included proposed cooperation on tourism, expansion and development of Cuba's fishing fleet, and non-monetary development assistance. Pelicaric described Cuba as a poor, "pathetic" country but he nonetheless was impressed with its advanced health care, pointing to an eye clinic the delegation visited.

¶ 16. (C) According to Pelicaric, the Cubans revisited several themes throughout the visit. They spoke often of the U.S. embargo and portrayed President Obama as having good intentions but captive to the U.S. political system. The Cubans also dwelt heavily on the EU's Common Position, seeking Croatian support for its elimination and saying they were looking to the GOS and FM Moratinos to end it during Spain's EU presidency. Pelicaric told the Charge he had seen images everywhere of the so-called "Miami 5" and suggested the United States might consider their use as leverage in securing release of political prisoners. The Charge asserted the convicted spies were not equivalent morally or in any other way to prisoners of conscience. In reviewing significant steps by the USG, he added that, despite our overtures for a more constructive relationship with Cuba, the USG had not yet seen any improvements in human rights or political conditions or in increased respect for civil liberties.

CHACON